

## British art, Brexit, and the Black Mediterranean

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## British Art, Brexit and the Black Mediterranean

In 2018, faced with the prospect of his own suicide driven by financial struggles, Roberto Pirrone instead shot another man, Idy Diene, a Senegalese vendor in Florence. Later, the white man told the police that he could not think straight when he had envisioned murder as an alternative to taking his own life. Pirrone's brutal logic cost him a thirty-year imprisonment (also taking him out of financial misery), while it cost Diene his life, 'devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago'.<sup>1</sup> When the Italian police ruled out racism as the motive behind the killing, the Senegalese community in the city started to gather on the scene to demonstrate their anger. Some rubbish bins were kicked, a couple of flowerpots were broken. Commenting on the effects of the demo, the mayor defined the Senegalese protest as vandalism, thus shifting the national discussion away from racism and putting blame on the victims.

Diene was one of the many migrant workers and refugees who arrive in Europe via what Ida Danewid and others have termed the Black Mediterranean, not so much a geographical space, as a historical condition of diaspora, shaped by the impact of centuries of French, Italian and British colonial rule.<sup>2</sup> One year after Diene's assassination, Phoebe Boswell, the Bridget Riley fellow at the British School at Rome (BSR), exhibited a multimedia installation titled *Wake Work*, including a four-panel group portrait drawn from multiple press images of the Senegalese community members who protested in Florence, and three smashed flowerpots (**Fig. X**).<sup>3</sup> 'I took these pots from the fountain in the institution's courtyard, without permission, signalling directly to the institution, a provocation that prompted an internal discussion about what the BSR represents, how it functions, what it upholds, its inertia, and ultimately, how to decolonise the academy'.<sup>4</sup>

Both act of remembrance and re-enactment, the broken flowerpots remove the institutional gaze away from the discourse of race, and recentre it on the complex connections between history and property — the property of the municipal flowerpots damaged by the protesters, the colonial legacies of the British Schools across the Mediterranean, the devaluation of Idy Diene's life subjected to 'racial calculus'. Britain's impending exit from the EU in 2019 should be taken as a context within which we can think about Boswell's work, but also as the text on which she intervenes to redact and annotate the role of British art institutions overseas in the times of Brexit.<sup>5</sup> While her initial project aimed to involve migrants and refugees in Rome marked by the experience of the Black Mediterranean, she quickly started to interrogate the relationship between the whiteness of the institution and Black optics — the structural limits which come to define the work of a Black artist only in relation to Blackness as spectacle. Interestingly, *Wake Work* is now part of Italian art history as well, having been taken on board by Black Italian artists

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<sup>1</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your Mother. A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ida Danewid, 'White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History', *Third World Quarterly*, 38: 7 (2017), pp. 1674-1689; The Black Mediterranean Collective, eds, *The Black Mediterranean. Bodies, Borders and Citizenship* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Each flowerpot commemorates three recent victims of racism in Italy: Emmanuel Chidi Namdi, Pateh Sabally and Idy Diene. Their portraits too were included in the show.

<sup>4</sup> Phoebe Boswell, 'Letter to Frank Bowling', Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain, 26th June, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Here I'm paraphrasing from Christina Sharpe's discussion of 'Black annotation' and 'Black redaction' as new modes of writing that counter the detached optics and brutal architectures of state power over Black life. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake. On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 113-130.

and academics to mobilize the transnational coalitions of solidarity and resilience through which the installation has acquired even deeper meanings.<sup>6</sup>

The institutional and political entanglements activated by the work deliberately demand that we use history to bridge the geographical distance between Dover and Lampedusa. Brexit does not originate anything new for British art and its institutions that does not already belong to the history of natural extraction and the calculus of life that have defined modernity in the advent of racial capitalism. And while I think about *Wake Work* and the lives that it commemorates and celebrates, I am reminded of the important difference in English between roots and routes: What transnational coalitions do we allow ourselves to form under the rubric of British art? Whose routes do we want British art to preserve and remember? Can we start to think, as Phoebe Boswell does, of artistic coalitions that engage with histories beyond the history of the nation? British art in the times of Brexit does not need to be defined by nationalism, but it can be defined, instead, by the active resistance to that logic.

Francesco Ventrella, Lecturer in Art History, University of Sussex and the 2019 Paul Mellon Rome fellow, British School at Rome

**Figure 1:**

Phoebe Boswell, *Wake Work I. Chinyere, You Are Loved, (Rest in Power, Emmanuel Chidi Namdi)*, 2019. Graphite and chalk pencil on black paper, mounted on wood; Phoebe Boswell, *In Solidarity and Remembrance*, 2019. Broken flowerpots taken from the fountain of the BSR; Phoebe Boswell, *Sing, Beloveds. Scream. Be Loud. Remember, We Were Never Meant to Survive (Rest in Power, Idy Diene)*, 2019. Graphite and white chalk on black paper, mounted on wood. Image courtesy of the artist.

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<sup>6</sup> Some elements of the installation *Wake Work* were exhibited again in Florence in 2019, part of *The Recovery Plan*, curated by Justin Randolph Thompson. In October 2019, Boswell has returned to the BSR for a talk with renowned Italian scholar and intellectual Angelica Pesarini (NYU) now available on podcast: <https://podcasts.apple.com/gh/podcast/the-bsr-podcast/id1524425465>